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Immediate Release

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Septic Tank Pollution Discovered in Lincoln County

(Santa Fe, NM) — New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) scientists have discovered that septic tank effluent has contaminated groundwater with high levels of nitrate in a Lincoln County subdivision near Ruidoso Downs. The subdivision was built atop fractured and faulted bedrock, which are well-established criteria for aquifer vulnerability to septic tank contamination.

"New Mexico's geology and groundwater aquifers are complex," NMED Secretary Ron Curry said. "That means the formulas used to determine what protects groundwater in one place, like a river valley, won't necessarily apply someplace else where there might be faster pathways for contamination to flow."

NMED scientists tested 33 wells in the community as part of a statewide assessment of groundwater quality. Five wells contained nitrate at 5 mg/L or above, and 2 wells had nitrate exceeding the health standard of 10 mg/L. All well owners were notified of the test results.

Even though the rate of nitrogen discharge from the septic tanks is nearly equal to what is allowed by state regulations, groundwater in this area with fractured bedrock has been contaminated by nitrate. That means the minimum lot size regulation of three-quarters of an acre may not protect ground water in all areas of New Mexico. The study is available on the NMED Web site at http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/fod/LiquidWaste/LincolnCoGW.pdf.

Computer models had predicted that septic systems installed on lots sized at three-quarters of an acre or larger could contaminate ground water in some areas, but this is the first study in New Mexico to verify those simulations with actual field data.

NMED Field Operations Director Ana Marie Ortiz said: "We have suspected for some time that even the minimum lot size of three-fourths of an acre may not protect ground water in all areas. But the Liquid Waste Disposal Regulations authorize NMED to impose stricter standards in areas with vulnerable aquifers, which is what we will have to do."

Secretary Curry noted that septic tanks have contaminated more water supply wells and more ground water in the state than all other sources of pollution combined. "Ground water is the source of 90% of our drinking water supplies, so it is imperative that we protect it," Secretary Curry said. "Septic tanks that we know are above such fractured bedrock zones will be subject to greater scrutiny from us from now on."

Residents in the area with concerns about the water quality of their private wells can have their water tested for free by delivering a sample to NMED's Ruidoso field office. Call (505) 258-3272 for more information. Instructions for collecting water samples are available online at: http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/fod/LiquidWaste/well_testing.html.

For further technical information contact Dennis McQuillan, Field Operations Manager, at (505) 476-8607.

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